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INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 WELLINGTON 000826

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/24/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [SMIG](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: KIWI MUSLIMS: WAHHABIS IN THEIR MIDST

REF: A) WELLINGTON 811 B) WELLINGTON 341 C)

WELLINGTON 570

Classified By: DCM David Keegan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This cable was drafted by ConGen Auckland and approved by  
Embassy Wellington.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: New Zealand Muslims are getting increased attention from broader society as the community faces internal divisions, Wahhabi influence from overseas groups, and discrimination. Alleged Wahhabi activities have been at the heart of some publicized schisms involving mosque administrations and student groups. Whether or not there are extremists in the community, Muslims are starting to feel a bit less welcome in New Zealand with periodic spikes in mosque desecrations and media attacks on Islam. END SUMMARY.

Internal divide  
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¶2. (SBU) The Federation of Islamic Associations in New Zealand (FIANZ) is an umbrella organization for smaller Muslim groups in New Zealand. FIANZ is the most prominent Muslim organization in the country (see ref A) with the most extensive links to government and broader society, but not all Muslims feel represented by it.

¶3. (C) In a meeting with ConOff, Reza Khatami, president of the Aal-e-Muhammad Society (AEM), an unofficial student group at Auckland University, said FIANZ is essentially a Sunni establishment. He said Shias do not feel represented by the national organization. Although he claimed there are no tensions between FIANZ and the Shia community, he criticized FIANZ for not doing enough to educate New Zealanders about Islam. A Shia himself, Khatami said AEM has some outreach activities but he did not give details. His predecessor and founding member of AEM, Shahin Soltanian, said there are approximately 8,000 Shias in New Zealand, most with roots in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India and a smaller number hailing from Iraq.

¶4. (C) Soltanian, who was also a past president of Auckland University's Islamic Society (AUIS), a registered student group informally affiliated with FIANZ, was also critical of FIANZ during his meeting with ConOff. He said tolerance of extremist activities by both FIANZ and AUIS has been a contentious issue within the Muslim community.

Wahhabi influence

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15. (C) Contrary to assertions by FIANZ president Javed Khan (see ref A) that there are no extremists in New Zealand, Soltanian told Conoff that Wahhabi groups have "overtly tried to influence New Zealand's Muslim society." Soltanian said AUIS has sponsored speakers from Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Haramain. Soltanian claimed these two groups receive Saudi money for their activities. AUIS's alleged drift towards or tolerance of Wahhabi ideology made it difficult for Shias and even some Sunnis to stay with the group, and so Soltanian and other disaffected members left to form AEM.

16. (C) Soltanian said the extremists' activities are not limited to the university campus; he claims that there are extremist preachers who operate with the full knowledge of FIANZ and the GNZ. After 9/11, he said the GNZ deported a few rabble-rousers, but others operate without hindrance aside from casual surveillance by the Government. He also claims that while he and others are trying to counter these groups' activities, most of the community remains silent for fear of being branded infidels. Soltanian asserted that inaction by the government, acquiescence by Muslim groups like FIANZ, and the extremists' strong financial backing from abroad make it difficult to counter their growing influence. He said their activities often target young Muslims.

17. (C) ConOff's own visit to Ponsonby mosque, Auckland's oldest Islamic house of worship, provided a mixed picture. The imam wore traditional Arabic garb, sometimes indicative of Wahhabi leanings, but he followed orthodox, non-Wahhabi methods: during the sermon or "khutba" he praised the first four or "rightly guided" Caliphs, and he offered an additional prayer set prescribed by Islam's prophet after the

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congregational prayer )- steps often ignored by Wahhabis. The sermon focused on a traditional theme -) God's mercy )- and cited the common message of prophets from the Abrahamic faiths. Posters were plastered on the mosque door for a protest the following day against Israeli actions in Lebanon (see ref C), but the protest was not mentioned in either the sermon or the community announcements that followed the imam's ministration. However, of the approximately 300 worshippers attending the day's services, about 20%, mainly young adults of Arab appearance, were following Wahhabi-style worship methods.

18. (C) Dr. William Shepard, a retired associate professor at Canterbury University, states that internal divisions in the Muslim Association of Canterbury (MAC) are partly due to the perception that the current management is Wahhabi. In a yet unpublished update of his extensive research paper on New Zealand Muslims, which he confidentially shared with ConOff, Shepard writes "The present (MAC) management, commonly labelled (sic) 'Wahhabi' by its opponents, sought in 2003 to turn the mosque property over to a trust dominated by the Saudi Al-Haramain Trust in return for money to establish a school...The opposition group has vigorously opposed these efforts, aided by the discovery that some branches of the Haramain Trust had been involved with terrorist activity, and has even sought help from the local municipal authorities." In March, Canterbury newspaper The Press reported that MAC's finances had been frozen as a result of a power struggle within management. The opposition group promised to hold elections later to decide on a permanent management board for MAC.

19. (C) Wahhabi footprints, though light, appear to have a long history. Shepard's paper notes that the formation of FIANZ in 1979 was spurred by the visit of a Saudi delegation that encouraged the various Muslim groups to unite. But while their current level of influence is difficult to ascertain, post-9/11 crackdowns on terrorist financing seems to have impaired some of their activities.

¶10. (SBU) The community also faces external problems. Every few months the press reports allegations of discrimination against Muslims. In May, a group of New Zealand Muslims accused the Customs Service of racial profiling. The Dominion Post published an op-ed piece in February of this year in which the writer accused Muslims of being a "fifth column" for Tehran and Damascus. Following the summer's Heathrow hijacking scare, FIANZ asked Muslim women to avoid wearing Islamic headaddress, and advised mosques to hire security firms to protect property.

¶11. (SBU) Don Brash and his National party, as well as other right-of-center parties, are also seen as hostile to Muslims. In recent weeks, Khan publicly criticized Brash for what FIANZ and some others believed were exclusionary remarks toward immigrants, especially Muslims. Foreign Minister Winston Peters is infamous amongst Muslim New Zealanders for a remark in July 2005 that likened the community to a multi-headed hydra, saying even "moderate" or "mainstream" Muslims come from the same body as extremists )- "they fit hand and glove."

¶12. (U) There have been spates of anti-Muslim vandalism; after the London bombings in July 2005 mosque walls were spray-painted and windows were broken. Mosques were also attacked this past July during the Israeli-Lebanese conflict (see ref A).

¶13. (C) At a group dinner attended by ConOff and active members of the Muslim community, Anjum Rahman, a former Labour parliamentary candidate and head of the Islamic Women's Council, said she was alienated at work after she decided to wear Islamic headaddress or "hijab". Some cited incidents in which Muslims were passed over for jobs ostensibly because of their faith. And Ali Ikram -- a TV One reporter and past participant in the Department's international visitor program (see ref B) -- said possible discrimination aside, many young and educated Muslim New Zealanders are, like their non-Muslim compatriots, leaving for Australia to find jobs. The group said this local brain drain is depriving the community of its most promising

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members who could also help uninitiated Kiwi Muslims integrate more easily into the broader society (see ref A).

¶14. (C) COMMENT: Reftel A showed that the first large wave of Muslim immigrants from the 1960s through the 1980s had no choice but to interact with their non-Muslim neighbors, and was thus quickly initiated into traditional New Zealand life. They were largely English-speaking, educated service providers whose language abilities and job skills dovetailed with Kiwi society. However, since the 1990s, immigrants with limited language and educational backgrounds have come into an already established Muslim community with mosques, Halal meat butchers, and government services available in their native language. If not carefully managed, this could lead to the kind of insulation seen in some Muslim populations in Europe that can potentially serve as a breeding ground for homegrown extremists. While we don't see extremism taking hold here yet, our GNZ counterparts and many Muslim leaders recognize the ingredients are there. END COMMENT.  
McCormick